

The Heights

By Austin Kmetovic

Many people fear heights. I fear how comfortable I am with heights. I feel at home off the ground, surrounded by open space and clinging to a body of wood with roots much deeper than my own. It's not adrenaline I crave, but something more serene; more peaceful and calming; something that seems to ground me, despite the fact that my feet are far from the soil below. Some trees I frequent have become places of refuge, allowing me to contemplate those things holding me down, or have an uninterrupted conversation with a fellow tree ascender. One friend and I have become so comfortable with our climbing that we can spend hours in a tree talking and taking in the spectacular panoramic views, all the while sprawled at ease over the branches as if we were simply sitting in plush armchairs by a warm fire. We enjoy the wind as it rocks the tree to a slow and steady rhythm, hearing the deep groans of the aged wood and the symphony of tinkling needles, sometimes escalating in tempo and volume until it is joined by our childlike whoops and laughs.

I can't remember the first time I climbed a tree, but I know I was young, and like most human children I was flexible, curious, and a natural born climber; feeling that vague connection to my ancient ancestors who descended from the trees long ago. I've always lived in the same house, just blocks away from one of Portland's greatest public parks. Over the years I've come to know almost every inch of this dormant volcano, including its numerous climbing trees, many of which we have named. The welcoming holds and branches of Home Tree, the fused branches and watchtower-like view from the redwood Outpost, and the triangular formation of Tom, Dick, and Harry, to name just a few. From these trees I have observed parts of the park through windows of soft branches that are known to very few. I have had a birds-eye view of a hawk

chased by crows, at night I've seen the silent silhouette of an owl against the handful of city stars, and from near the top of a standalone pine I got my clearest glimpse of the lonesome fox that still dwells in the fragmented forest.

From these trees I discern the passage of time, seeing the grounds become more landscaped and developed, and picking out those old trees which were spared in the massive clear-cut which resulted in the christening of Stumptown. These old trees and scattered wildlife are a symbol of the former state of this land, and a reminder of the impact of our species. Still, there will always be trees to climb and those most ape-like of our species to climb them. I know that as long as I am capable I will climb; revisiting some of these trees I climb today years down the road, and returning to my home off the ground.